

# **Lessons Learned from a School/Community Strategic Planning Process**

**Billie A. Hauser**

**December 2004**



**Post Office Box 1348  
Charleston, WV 25325**

Founded in 1966 as a not-for-profit corporation, AEL provides services to educators, education publishers, and policymakers. Services include rigorous research design and implementation, research reviews, intensive product and program evaluation, randomized field trials, technical assistance, and award-winning professional development programs. AEL operates several contracts funded by the U.S. Department of Education: a Regional Educational Laboratory, the Region IV Comprehensive Center, and an Eisenhower Regional Consortium for Mathematics and Science Education.

To contact AEL about research, products, or services:  
P. O. Box 1348, Charleston, WV 25325; 304-347-0400 or 800-624-9120  
[info@ael.org](mailto:info@ael.org) • [www.ael.org](http://www.ael.org)



© 2004 by AEL

Reproduction of this document is permitted provided credit is given to AEL as the source.

This publication is based on work sponsored wholly or in part by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), U.S. Department of Education, under contract number ED-01-CO-0016. Its contents do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of IES, the Department, or any other agency of the U.S. government.

AEL is an Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Employer.

# Contents

Historical Context .....	1
The Strategic Planning Process .....	2
Findings .....	4
Summary .....	7
References .....	9

## **Lessons Learned From a School/Community Strategic Planning Process**

AEL's partnership with Lincoln County began in early January 2001, when AEL staff, at the request of the West Virginia State Department of Education, met with the state-appointed district superintendent to discuss the school system's needs and ways in which AEL might assist in meeting those needs. Over the course of a series of meetings during the spring of 2001, it was determined that one component of AEL's assistance would be to develop and facilitate a school/community strategic planning process. The West Virginia State Board of Education assumed administrative control of the county school system in June 2000, following a state report on the county's failure to make adequate progress in rectifying major deficiencies identified in an October 1999 audit (West Virginia Department of Education, 2002). One of the conditions for regaining local board control was that the Lincoln County school system develop a strategic plan, with community input, that included a mission statement and measurable goals to support the mission. The planning process AEL developed not only met the condition but also identified objectives and strategies to support and help accomplish the goals.

### **Historical Context**

To grasp the complexity of such a task, it is necessary to have a historical understanding of Lincoln County and some of the issues it has faced in the past and continues to address. The county is located in rural southwestern West Virginia, in the northwestern tip of what is known as the coalfields, a previously booming coal mining region now plagued by long-standing political issues, unemployment, poverty, and geographic isolation. Established in 1867, from parts of four surrounding counties, Lincoln County and its residents continue to retain some of the character of and allegiances to its former configurations with four very distinct communities: Griffithsville, Guyan Valley, Hamlin, and Harts (Lincoln County GenWeb, 2001). These characteristics are paralleled by the infrastructure—no roads cross the county; instead, several routes circle the area.

Like neighboring counties to its south and east, Lincoln County struggles with poverty, with a quarter of the population (24.9 percent) and a third of children (33.7 percent) living below the federal poverty line. The median household income, according to the most recent census, is \$22,744, compared to a state median of \$27,432 and a national median of \$37,005. The population of 22,108 is 99 percent White (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001).

Education in Lincoln County has an interesting history that influences the current context. In 1975, a group of parents from Lincoln County sued the West Virginia State Board of Education on the grounds that the distribution of tax monies toward education favored wealthier counties over poorer ones (West Virginia Archives and History, 1998). The court case (*Janet Pauley v. West Virginia State Board of Education*), settled in 1982 by what is known as the *Recht* decision, mandated that West Virginia forge a path toward equitable school funding. A group of Lincoln County parents reopened the case in 1995,

and, in 1997, Judge Robinson agreed that despite progress, West Virginia's financial system still violated the state constitution (Keller, 1999). Since that time, West Virginia has gone from a funding equity grade of B+ in 1999 (Keller, 1999), to a funding equity grade of C+ in 2002 (Fine, 2002).

In addition to poverty, state takeover, and lawsuits, the county has been wrestling with the issue of school consolidation for more than a decade. In 1991, Lincoln County residents defeated a levy proposal to consolidate the county's four high schools into one. The School Building Authority, created after the Recht decision to help ensure equitable treatment of school facilities, responded to the defeat of the levy by not giving monies to the school system to upgrade and maintain buildings. Various plans were developed throughout the 1990s to address the consolidation issue, with each being defeated by the county school board, usually after strong vocal opposition from residents (Richard, 2002).

## **The Strategic Planning Process**

Taking into consideration the aforementioned characteristics of Lincoln County, in fall 2001, AEL developed a strategic planning process to include representatives of the school system, business, students, and parents from all four high school communities. It was designed as an open forum that called for neutral facilitation by AEL, with assistance from the Greater Kanawha Valley Foundation. School principals and central office staff identified individuals who were active in the community and who might have an interest in participating in the process, and letters of invitation were sent to these individuals. In addition, announcements were made at local organizational meetings and published in school and community newsletters. Knowing that there was significant division between and among the four distinct areas of the county, and in an effort to reach people in all four high school communities, four orientation meetings were conducted prior to beginning the actual planning process, one at each of the area high schools. At these introductory meetings, held in January and February 2002, the purpose for developing a strategic plan and the process for doing so were presented and discussed to help people make informed decisions about their participation. An emphasis was placed on the need for people to participate as representatives of Lincoln County, rather than as residents of a single high school community. AEL facilitators made it clear that the issue of consolidation would not be discussed since the strategic plan would be for all students regardless of the current or future number of schools in the county. AEL's responsibilities during these meetings and the planning process were to provide neutral facilitation and help participants maintain a clear focus.

The first of four whole-group strategic planning meetings was held in mid-February followed by three additional meetings conducted in late February and March 2002. Representatives from all four areas of the county participated. The overall attendance generally ranged from 24 to 62, with about half that number representing the Lincoln County school system and the other half representing business, community, and parents. The process began with an exercise through which participants developed a vision of what a successful Lincoln County would look like in 10 years. Seven categories were identified through the visioning exercise. Participants collected data around each of the areas and the data were

presented at the next meeting. The group then mapped the assets and challenges facing Lincoln County related to each of the areas. The role of the school system in accomplishing the vision was discussed, and from that, a mission statement was developed for Lincoln County Schools with seven goal areas identified to accomplish the mission. Subsequently, during March and April, five small-group meetings were held to tighten the goal statements, develop objectives for each goal, and identify strategies to support each objective. This was sometimes demanding and highly focused work and required a good deal of time from those who chose to participate. A whole-group meeting was held again in May to review the draft plan, make minor revisions, and celebrate the completion of the task and the contributions of each participant.

At the May meeting, several members of the group voiced skepticism about the future of the plan and suggested creating an oversight committee composed of community members, parents, and school staff to ensure its effective implementation. The feeling that the school system did not intend to change was not shared by all participants, although it was voiced by some. Others were aware of the tendency to continue doing things the same way because of the challenges associated with time and other resources. (For additional information on the strategic planning process, see *Report on the Strategic Planning Process in Lincoln County, West Virginia*, Chadwick, 2002.)

The Strategic Plan was presented to the Lincoln County School Board in August 2002. Due to a particularly heavy fall and winter board schedule, the presentation of the plan to the West Virginia State Board of Education was delayed until the January 2003 meeting, at which time it was presented to and accepted by the West Virginia State Board of Education. Fulfilling Objective 1e of the Strategic Plan, and under the direction of the Lincoln County superintendent of schools, a Mission and Goals Oversight Committee was formed to monitor the implementation of the Strategic Plan on an ongoing basis and, when necessary, revise the systemwide goals, objectives, and strategies. The committee developed a monitoring process and identified a chairperson for each of seven small subgroups which were given the responsibility for carrying out the process. The chairpersons then made up the Mission and Goals Oversight Committee and reported the small-group findings at each Oversight Committee meeting.

Early in 2003, shortly after the monitoring plan was implemented, AEL convened a group of West Virginia Department of Education representatives, AEL staff, and Lincoln County central office representatives to discuss possible next steps in moving Lincoln County forward. During this meeting, the relationship between the Strategic Plan and the Unified County Improvement Plan was brought to the table. A state department staff person had analyzed the two plans and identified the commonalities and differences. It was decided that those goals and objectives common to both plans, and any additional goals necessary for regaining local board control, would be the priority and others would be addressed when possible. It was further determined that strategies under each objective would serve as examples, but it was not expected that all schools would do all things. The Mission and Goals Oversight Committee would then become an advisory committee for the implementation of the revised plans.

During the planning process, AEL collected data from participants as well as from attendees of the orientation meetings who did not choose to participate in the planning process. The purpose of the data collection was to inform the work. The data collection included a survey and two phone-interview protocols. The survey was administered during a whole-group planning meeting in spring 2002, and included demographic items, reasons for participation, questions related to challenges facing Lincoln County that could hinder the completion and implementation of a strategic plan, as well as AEL's role in the process. Phone interviews were then conducted with a random sample of Lincoln County residents, stratified by level of attendance in the planning process and whether the interviewee was a school system employee or community member. In addition, in spring 2003, AEL conducted interviews with the eight regularly attending members of the Mission and Goals Oversight Committee. The interview protocol used for this interview included questions about the oversight process, challenges and barriers to the implementation of the Strategic Plan, and the merger of the Strategic Plan with the Unified County Improvement Plan.

## **Findings**

Data culled from the survey and interviews, as well as facilitator insights, are reflected in the following observations and lessons learned from the work. As designed, the planning process required that politically and geographically diverse groups convene around a common purpose. More than half of the 33 participants indicated on the survey conducted in spring 2002 that they had seen positive changes in the relationships among people from the four communities. A representative of the business community who participated in the planning said that witnessing the working relationship established between and among people from the four high school areas gave him the impression that regardless of where they lived or their feelings on consolidation, "they were all trying to accomplish the same thing, for the first time in my life." There were mixed opinions regarding the relationships between Lincoln County residents and the state educational entities (State Board of Education and the State Department of Education), although a perceived lack of trust appeared to prevail with most participants. More than half of the 46 respondents in the first phone interview indicated that changes were beginning to occur between residents and central office. Respondents who participated in the process reported observing a more positive relationship between central office and residents than respondents who chose not to participate in the process.

To be determined over time will be the long-term effect of giving voice to those who generally felt that unless you were a school system employee, you had no influence over what occurred. But the power of dialogue must be acknowledged when considering the Lincoln County strategic planning process.

The ability of Lincoln County residents to focus on children and their needs, in the face of significant differences in beliefs and current controversy, has been demonstrated in other ways as well. Despite years of consolidation debate and discomfiture resulting from the state takeover, Lincoln County residents continue to support their schools in ways unrelated to consolidation. One example is the recent school levy that was passed by a substantial margin. It is difficult to determine what role the planning process had in the passing of the levy, but some participants reported that the process served to provide them

with hope for the school system and its ability to change and improve. It is important to note, however, that through the years Lincoln County residents have been supportive of school levies. This has been true in times when it has been difficult, and sometimes impossible, to pass levies in economically stable communities, let alone those considered to be economically disadvantaged (Election Returns for the Board of Canvassers of the County of Lincoln, State of West Virginia, 1994, 1998, 2002).

Also of note is that even with the variance in participation in the process over time, support for and interest in the planning process was sustained. This is in light of the fact that for most of the meeting dates, the planning process was competing with other activities. Perhaps it could be inferred that because of the smallness of the community and the fact the the school system is a key employer in Lincoln County, decisions are of greater importance to the residents than they might be in a city or urban setting. If this is true, then the sustained interest should not be surprising.

Those who participated in the planning process had deeply embedded expectations for what the school system should be and what it would provide for their children. The one segment of the school community not represented in the planning process was the students. There was an initial effort on the part of some of the participants to involve students in the process, but it appears that the students' myriad other evening activities kept them from participating. If the process were to take place again, one suggestion would be to develop a strategy, as part of the overall process, to gain input from students, especially those at the secondary level.

Upon reflection, it might be important to ask why the school system had to develop a mission statement and goals. The State Board of Education's purpose for requiring that a strategic plan be developed, although seemingly obvious, is unclear. If it is to provide the school system with a loosely outlined plan for its work, then a mission statement and goals appear sufficient. However, if the intent is to develop a plan—with specific goals and direction for achieving those goals—that could inform decision making at all levels, then a mission statement and goals may not be sufficient. Simply identifying a goal does not ensure that it will be accomplished. Clear and focused direction is needed in the form of objectives and strategies to accomplish the goal. If this process were to be repeated, one suggestion would be to obtain a clearly defined purpose for and intent of the process from the State Board of Education.

Related to the strategic plan issue was the confusion brought on by the existence of another plan, the Unified County Improvement Plan that all school districts in West Virginia must develop. Very early in the process, one central office participant voiced concern over the possible confusion brought about by having dual plans. However, her concerns were allayed and the process moved forward. In retrospect, it would have saved time and disappointment in the outcome of the process if her concerns had been fully addressed by the central office leadership and the State Department of Education. Perhaps, given more attention at the time, a strategy could have been developed to integrate the plans during the strategic planning process. Certainly this is something for the State Department of Education and the State Board of Education to consider. Should school systems be asked to provide a



strategic plan as well as an improvement plan, and, if so, how should the two align with or relate to one another? This needs to be addressed before another school system, with the best intentions, leads a school community through a lengthy planning process without a clear understanding of its purpose.

In addition, the purpose for requiring community input in the planning process is unclear. One of the lessons learned from this experience is that most community and parent representatives are not interested in serving on a planning committee in a cursory capacity. In the case of Lincoln County, they wanted assurance that their role was real and that the final product would actually provide direction for the school system. This was one of the reasons they wanted and were willing to serve on the Mission and Goals Oversight Committee. They did not say that they felt the school system did not intend to change, but there seemed to be a general consensus that, because the everyday running of a school or system is a complex task, the tendency might be to do what is familiar and therefore more expedient. There also was still an atmosphere of distrust of the school system, although this lack of trust diminished for many of the participants as a result of their involvement in the planning process.

The planning process was deliberately designed so that no one voice was heard over others. It was crucial to the success of the process that representatives of the school system who participated in the process conduct themselves as equal partners at the table. They functioned as any other member of the committee until and unless they were asked to provide specific school/district information, and this occurred most often during the subgroup work. It was not surprising that it was difficult for some who were used to being in charge, especially when at their school or at central office, to step out of their accustomed role. On occasion, when someone stepped back into the “in charge” role, facilitators had to quickly intervene in order to alleviate the potential for changing the dynamics of the group. A lesson to be taken from the Lincoln County process is that, although expectations and norms of behavior have been established and participants have good intentions, it is difficult to suppress customary modes of behavior. With the current controversy over consolidation on everyone’s mind, individual agendas sometimes surfaced. However, overall, most participants put forth a concerted effort to stick with the task at hand and set aside personal and controversial concerns.

The importance of consistent leadership and support, especially during any change initiative, cannot be ignored. During AEL’s involvement in Lincoln County, the participation of two key players in the process came to an abrupt and unexpected end. The assistant superintendent, who had served as the voice of the central office in the absence of the superintendent, as well as providing day-to-day assistance to AEL, resigned in early fall 2002. His departure left a noticeable void even though his responsibilities were quickly and capably met by others. The initiative was able to move forward because he did not have sole ownership of the process but shared that, and the resulting commitment, with others. Following his leaving and the presentation of the Plan to the State Board of Education, one of the key community leaders (cochair of the Mission and Goals Oversight Committee) had to withdraw due to illness. His absence left a significant void because of his leadership in past school issues and his instrumental role in the process itself. He was one who, when others

would allow individual agendas to get in the way of progress, would speak up and remind everyone of why they were there. In one particular instance, he pulled a picture of his grandchild out of his wallet and indicated that the only reason he was there was for the children and that, if others weren't interested in the same thing, then there was no reason for him to stay. When he and the assistant superintendent left, the dynamics of the group changed. The work continued, but the decrease in the group's energy level brought about by their absence was noticeable.

## Summary

In conclusion, the participants in the strategic planning process are to be commended for their diligence and commitment in the development of a worthy Strategic Plan for Lincoln County. The complex task was sometimes grueling and, at times, required personal sacrifice, especially when coming to consensus on issues for which everyone had strong feelings. School consolidation was one of those issues. The outcome of the community strategic planning process in Lincoln County offers evidence that it is possible for deeply divided communities to set aside their differences, with one another and with education leaders, to focus on their best hopes for their children's education. A planning process that is designed to help people move beyond divisive issues and focus on common goals, has the potential, not just to build relationships and community support for education, but to improve the entire education improvement planning process. This being said, the consequent lessons learned from the work and recommendations are cited for consideration by state boards of education, state departments of education, school systems, interested and involved citizens, and organizations or individuals who may serve as neutral facilitators of a similar process.

- Schools and school systems may contend simultaneously with multiple improvement and strategic plans that can lead to dysfunction and lack of common purpose. State boards and state departments of education must help schools and school systems achieve program coherence by first achieving policy alignment at the state level. If multiple plans are to be created, the purpose for each should be clearly articulated prior to its development. However, greater program coherence could be achieved by developing one school improvement planning process designed to include significant community involvement.
- Given the unique and sometimes tenuous relationships that exist between and among the various factions within school communities, neutral facilitation of the process is recommended. Trust in the authenticity of the process can be fostered through neutral facilitation.
- The process has the potential to mobilize the larger community and enable takeover school systems to continue to move forward after regaining local control, instead of falling back into former patterns of operation and behavior.
- The roles of and the relationships between participants will always factor into the success of any initiative. For those who might need to implement a planning initiative similar to that in Lincoln County, it is important to design and facilitate a collaborative process that allows people to fully communicate beyond their established roles and reputations and become equal participants at the table.

- This type of process has the potential for changing the dynamic of accountability from politics to a solid, broad-based strategic plan that is about children, performance, and expectations for all educators, students, and community and parent representatives involved in the school community.
- The process provides opportunities to place new people into roles that can influence school board and administrative decisions by sustaining focus on the mission, goals, and objectives that have been agreed to by the community and accepted by the board.
- Convening diverse groups of people around a common goal is an ideal opportunity for building new relationships and healing tenuous ones. Therefore, the process should be designed to capitalize on this opportunity by identifying strategies that will nurture these relationships and garner broad support for future endeavors.

## References

- Chadwick, K. (September 2002). *Report on the strategic planning process in Lincoln County, West Virginia*. Charleston, WV: AEL, Inc.
- Fine, L. (2002, January 10). West Virginia. *Education Week*, p. 166.
- Lincoln County GenWeb. (2001). *Origins of Lincoln County*. Retrieved May 17, 2004, from <http://www.rootsweb.com/~wvlincol/origins.html>
- Keller, B. (1999, January 11). Filling in the gaps. *Education Week*, pp. 183, 206.
- Richard, A. (2002, April 10). School merger foes rallying in West Virginia. *Education Week*, pp. 1, 18-19.
- U.S. Bureau of the Census. (2001). Lincoln County quickfacts. Retrieved May 17, 2004, from <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/54/54043.html>
- West Virginia Archives and History. (1998). "Time trail, West Virginia": May 1998 programs. Retrieved May 18, 2004, from <http://www.wvculture.org/history/timetrl/ttmay.html>
- West Virginia Department of Education. (2002). State board takes control of Lincoln County schools. Retrieved May 18, 2004, from <http://wvde.state.wv.us/news/183.html>